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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent and causes of burnout among extension agents in Ohio. From the 241 extension agents working in the 88 counties of Ohio, researchers selected a random sample of 101 agents. Included in the sample were 34 agriculture agents, 33 home economics agents. Included in the sample agents were asked to complete a survey questionnaire designed to collect data concerning personal, organizational, and job (environmental) factors. Of the 91 surveys returned, 89 were usable. The Ohio extension agents were found to experience a low to moderate level of burnout, with less than 20 percent of them appearing to manifest a high level of burnout. In general, the younger agents--those between the ages of 20 and 30--experienced higher levels of burnout. Males and females experienced the same relative levels of burnout, with single individuals undergoing significantly higher levels of burnout than their married counterparts. Job satisfaction was the best single predictor of burnout when all significant independent variables were entered in a stepwise regression equation. As a group, the 4-H agents experienced more burnout than did the agriculture or home economics agents. (MN)

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# BURNOUT AMONG EXTENSION AGENTS IN THE OHIO COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE

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## INTRODUCTION

Extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service are faced with reduced funding, fewer clientele and increased service demands from those they serve. The work environment generated by these conditions results in job stress and, consequently, the agent may experience burnout on the job. It is important that Extension administrators know the incidence of burnout among Extension agents. Before administrators can begin to develop various interventions to alleviate burnout among these agents, a clearer understanding of the factors associated with burnout is needed.

Related literature and research have indicated that problems associated with burnout have resulted in turnover, absenteeism and job dissatisfaction (Pines, 1981). Clark (1981) reported that during the period 1971 to 1981, there was a 14% annual rate of turnover among agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, with job dissatisfaction a possible factor. Could burnout, therefore, be a problem among extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service? Considering the rate of turnover, the changing pattern of funding for the organization, demands by clientele and demands for accountability of agents' time, there is reason to suspect burnout to be a problem among agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The major focus of this study was to determine the extent of burnout among extension agents in Ohio. Furthermore, the study sought to examine the extent to which burnout was related to major personal, organizational and job (environmental) characteristics.

The study included the following variables:

1. Independent Variables

   a. Personal factors: age, sex, marital status

   b. Organizational factors:
      Job Satisfaction
      Job Performance
      Work Overload

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c. Job (environmental) factors:
Skill Variety
Job Autonomy
Task Identity

II. Dependent Variable

Burnout

## Objectives

The specific objectives directing this investigation were:

1. To determine the level of burnout among extension agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service.

2. To determine whether there were differences in the levels of burnout among extension agents in agriculture, home economics and 4-H.

3. To determine the extent to which burnout was associated with personal factors: age, sex and marital status.

4. To determine the extent to which burnout was associated with organizational factors: job satisfaction, work overload and job performance.

5. To determine the extent to which burnout was associated with job (environmental) factors: skill variety, job autonomy and task identity.

# PROCEDURE

## Population and Sample

The target population for the study consisted of Extension agents in the 88 counties of Ohio (N = 241). This population included agriculture agents (N = 83), home economics agents (N = 85) and 4-H agents (N = 73).

A random sample of 101 agents was drawn for inclusion in the study. The sample for the study, therefore, consisted of 34 agriculture agents, 33 home economics agents and 34 4-H agents.

## Design of the Study

The design of the study was a combination of descriptive and correlational research. This design allowed the investigators to answer the research questions pertaining to the specific objectives. Data were collected to determine the level of burnout among extension agents. Relationships between personal, organizational, job (environmental) factors and burnout were calculated.

## Instrumentation

Because of the distribution and location of the subjects under investigation, the most effective means of collecting the data was by mailed questionnaire. There were five sections of the data gathering instrument used in the study which drew on the earlier work of Maslach and Jackson (1978) for burnout (Part I), the job (environmental) factors instrument (Part II) by Hackman and Lawler (1971), Warner's (1973) modification of the Brayfield-Rothe job satisfaction instrument (Part III), and the work overload instrument (Part IV) by Osipow and Spokane (1982). Part V of the instrument was developed to gather demographic information. Data regarding job performance was not collected with the questionnaire. Rather, this variable was measured by using agents' performance rating scores obtained from the State Extension Office.

The burnout scale (Part I) measured three dimensions of burnout that were reported to be independent of one another (Maslach, 1971). These dimensions were emotional exhaustion (e.g., "I feel emotionally drained from my work."), depersonalization (e.g., "I have become more callous toward people since I took this job."), and personal accomplishment (e.g., I deal very effectively with the problems of my clientele."). Each statement in the three dimensions was rated twice, once for frequency of occurrence which ranged from "Never" (0) to "Everyday" (6). The second rating was for the intensity of the experience, ranging from "Very Mild" (1) to "Very Strong" (7).

Part II (Job Factors) consisted of eight items that measured skill variety, job autonomy and task identity of agents. The 14-item instrument that made up Part III measured job satisfaction using a five-point scale that ranged from "Most of the Time" (5) to "Rarely or Never" (1). The work overload instrument (Part IV) had ten items and used a five-point scale: 1 = "Most of the Time," and 5 = "Rarely or Never." Part V was designed to gather demographic data about the agents. It sought information regarding age, sex, marital status, years of experience, area of program responsibility and major field of study.

## Reliability and Validity of the Instruments

Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were calculated for the instruments to determine the extent to which they were reliable. The coefficients were: $r = .83$ (frequency) and $r = .84$ (intensity) for the burnout scale; $r = .78$ for skill variety; $r = .58$ for task identity; $r = .55$ for job autonomy; $r = .91$ for job satisfaction; and $r = .83$ for the work overload instrument. Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the low reliability coefficients for job autonomy and task identity were acceptable (Nunnanly, 1967).

These instruments were also judged to be valid. The burnout instrument was reported by Maslach and Jackson (1982) to have content, concurrent and predictive validity. The subscales of skill variety, job autonomy and task identity were validated in an earlier study by Suandi (1982) on agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. Bowen and Warmbrod (1980) validated the job satisfaction instrument in a national study of job satisfaction of teacher educators in agriculture, and

Kittrell (1980) also validated the satisfaction scale on a study of agents' interest themes in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service. The scale, work overload, was reported to have content validity by Osipow and Spokane (1982).

## Data Collection

Data were collected by mailed questionnaires. Ninety-one of the 101 instruments were returned, and eighty-nine (88%) were usable. A post card follow up and telephone contact were necessary in order to receive this rate of response. Data were also collected from two of the ten non-respondents for the purpose of determining possible differences between the respondents and non-respondents. Examination of the data indicated no significant differences between the respondents and non-respondents. Therefore, results were generalized to the population investigated.

## Data Analysis

Freqencies, percentages, measures of central tendency, variability and relationships were used to organize, simplify and summarize the data. Analysis of variance was used to compare the groups on selected variables, and step-wise multiple regression was used to determine the best single predictor of burnout.

# RESULTS

## Level of Burnout Among Extension Agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service

Extension agents in Ohio were found to experience a low to moderate level of burnout on the three subscales that made up the burnout instrument. More than 80% of the agents who responded to the survey received scores that placed them in the lower to middle third of the scores, hence they were found to experience a low to moderate level of burnout. Less than 20% of all agents scored in the upper third of the scores indicating a high level of burnout.

## Emotional Exhaustion: Frequency and Intensity

The majority (54%) of the agents experienced a low level of burnout as measured by the emotional exhaustion: frequency subscale (Table 1).

Fewer agents (12%) obtained scores in the upper third indicating a high level of burnout. The overall mean score for all agents on the frequency dimension was 17.85 (scores could range from 0-54); the standard deviation was 9.24.

On the intensity dimension, as shown in Table 1, one-third of the agents were found to experience a low level of burnout while close to half of the agents (46%) experienced a moderate level of burnout. The overall mean score was 27.79 (scores could range from 0-63); the standard deviation was 12.30.

Table 1

Distribution of Burnout Scores

| Dimension of Burnout | Level of Burnout | | | | | | | | Means and Standard Deviation | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Lower Third | | Middle Third | | Upper Third | | Total | | | |
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | X | S.D. |
| Emotional Exhaustion: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency | 48 | 54 | 30 | 34 | 11 | 12 | 89 | 100 | 17.85 | 9.24 |
| Intensity | 33 | 37 | 41 | 46 | 15 | 17 | 89 | 100 | 27.79 | 12.30 |
| Depersonalization: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency | 61 | 68 | 21 | 24 | 7 | 8 | 89 | 100 | 4.44 | 4.29 |
| Intensity | 52 | 58 | 27 | 30 | 10 | 12 | 89 | 100 | 6.79 | 5.93 |
| Personal Accomplishment: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency | 44 | 49 | 30 | 34 | 15 | 17 | 89 | 100 | 38.96 | 5.44 |
| Intensity | 44 | 49 | 31 | 35 | 14 | 16 | 89 | 100 | 42.88 | 5.94 |

## Depersonalization: Frequency and Intensity

Sixty-eight percent of the agents experienced a low level of burnout on the frequency dimension. Less than one-third (24%) had a moderate level of burnout. Eight percent of the agents experienced a high level of burnout. The mean score on the frequency dimension was 4.44 (scores could range from 0-30); the standard deviation was 4.29.

For the intensity dimension of depersonalization, 58% of the agents experienced a low level of burnout and close to one-third of the agents (30%) experienced a moderate level of burnout. The mean score was 6.79 (scores could range from 0-35); the standard deviation of 5.93 (Table 1).

## Personal Accomplishment: Frequency and Intensity

Scores on this subscale were interpreted inversely as compared to scores for emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The lower the scores, the higher the levels of burnout experienced. One-third of the agents experienced a moderate level of burnout on the personal accomplishment: frequency dimension. Forty-nine percent of the agents were found to experience a low level of burnout on the personal accomplishment: frequency dimension. The mean score for the frequency dimension of this subscale was 38.96 (scores could range from 0-48); the standard deviation was 5.44. On the intensity dimension of this subscale, 84% of the agents experienced a low to moderate level of burnout and 16% had scores that placed them in the high level of burnout (Table 1).

## Level of Burnout by Age

Tables are not provided for the analysis of burnout by age, sex, marital status and program responsibility due to space limitations.

On the three subscales of burnout (both frequency and intensity; except for personal accomplishment: frequency), the younger, 20-30 year old agents experienced significantly higher levels of burnout than the older agents (31-40 years of age, 41-50 years of age or 51 and over).

## Level of Burnout by Sex

Males and females were burned out to the same extent.

## Level of Burnout by Marital Status

Single agents experienced significantly higher levels of burnout than married agents on the following dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion: frequency and intensity and depersonalization: frequency. There were no differences on the other dimensions.

## Level of Burnout by Area of Program Responsibility

4-H agents experienced significantly higher levels of burnout than agriculture or home economics agents. The mean scores obtained by 4-H agents on the frequency and intensity dimensions of the burnout scale

(except for personal accomplishment: frequency) were significantly higher than the scores received by home economics and agriculture agents.

## Relationships Between Age, Sex and Marital Status and Burnout

Table 2 contains Pearson correlation coefficients that indicate a low negative relationship between skill variety and depersonalization, a moderate positive relationship with personal accomplishment and a negligible positive relationship with emotional exhaustion.

There were also low to moderate negative relationships between job autonomy and burnout.

Except for the depersonalization subscale, Pearson product moment correlations were negligible and negative between task identity and burnout; they were negative and low with the depersonalization subscale.

## Relationships Between Organizational Factors and Burnout

Moderate to substantial negative relationships were found between job satisfaction and burnout. The data in Table 2 indicate that as the levels of job satisfaction increased, burnout decreased.

Low to moderate positive relationships (Table 2) exist between work overload and burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization). Negligible negative to low positive relationships were found between job performance and burnout.

## Stepwise Multiple Regressions Analysis

Job satisfaction was the best single predictor of burnout when all significant independent variables from the earlier correlations were entered in a step-wise regression equation. It accounted for 31% of the variance on the emotional exhaustion subscales (Tables 3 & 4) and over 20% on the depersonalization subscales. It was also the only variable that explained variance for personal accomplishment: frequency (28%); it explained 18% of the variance in the personal accomplishment: intensity scores (tables not provided in this paper due to space limitations).

Table 2

Relationship[a] Between Age, Sex, Marital Status, Job (Environmental) Factors, Organizational Factors and Burnout

| Variable | Burnout n = 89 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Emotional Exhaustion: | | Depersonalization: | | Personal Accomplishment: | |
| | Frequency | Intensity | Frequency | Intensity | Frequency | Intensity |
| Age | -.33*** | -.31*** | -.41*** | -.44*** | .07 | .19* |
| Sex | .09 | .17* | -.09 | -.08 | -.15 | -.06 |
| Marital Status | -.22** | -.23** | -.18* | -.18* | .04 | .06 |
| Skill Variety | .05 | .01 | -.22** | -.28** | .35*** | .34*** |
| Job Autonomy | -.33*** | -.30** | -.18** | -.21* | .29** | .31*** |
| Task Identity | -.03 | -.04 | -.20* | -.24** | -.09 | .07 |
| Job Satisfaction | -.56*** | -.54*** | -.48*** | -.52*** | .53*** | .43*** |
| Work Overload | .43*** | .32*** | .21* | .21* | -.14 | .04 |
| Job Performance | -.03 | .01 | -.03 | -.02 | .10 | .09 |

[a]All correlations are Pearson product moment correlations except for the variable age where the correlation is the Spearman.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 3

Step-Wise Multiple Regression of Emotional Exhaustion: Frequency (Burnout) on Three Significant Variables

| Independent Variables Entered Step-Wise in Equation | Multiple R | $R^2$ | $R^2$ Increment | F* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Job Satisfaction | .5634 | .3174 | .3174 | 40.5 |
| Work Overload | .6416 | .4116 | .0942 | 30.0 |
| Age | .6623 | .4386 | .0270 | 22.1 |

*p < .05.

Table 4

Step-Wise Multiple Regression of Emotional Exhaustion: Intensity (Burnout) Scores on Three Significant Variables

| Independent Variables Entered Step-Wise in Equation | Multiple R | $R^2$ | $R^2$ Increment | F* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Job Satisfaction | .5499 | .3024 | .3024 | 37.7 |
| Sex | .5900 | .3481 | .0460 | 23.0 |
| Work Overload | .6146 | .3778 | .0297 | 17.2 |

*p < .05.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The majority of agents in the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service experience a low level of burnout. However, a significant minority ($\geq$ 12%) experience high levels of burnout which demand attention.

2. The 4-H agents as a group experience the most burnout; so do young agents and single agents.

3. Agents who are satisfied with their jobs don't have as much of a problem with burnout but as job satisfaction decreases, burnout increases.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Agents experiencing high and low levels of burnout should be interviewed to determine in each case how they cope or fail to cope with stress.

2. The Ohio Cooperative Extension Service should develop intervention strategies and determine their effectiveness. Suggested interventions are: develop on-the-job social support systems, provide training and counseling on successful coping strategies, provide ample opportunity for agents to alter their job responsibilities periodically.

3. Further analyze factors contributing to dissatisfaction (particularly with 4-H agents) and offer remediation.

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